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SUMMARY OUTCOMES

UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy

'Literacy Challenges in South, South West and Central Asia: Building Partnerships and Promoting Innovative Approaches'

29-30 November 2007, New Delhi, India

The participants in the Sub-Regional Conference in Support of Global Literacy in South, South-West and Central Asia met on 29 and 30 November 2007 in New Delhi, India, at the invitation of UNESCO and the Government of India, and gratefully acknowledged the warm welcome and gracious hospitality of their Indian hosts. The presence of the Chief Guest, Mrs Sonia Gandhi, and of the First Lady of Sri Lanka, Mrs Shiranthi Rajapakse, gave special honour to the meeting. The participants, drawn from fourteen countries of the sub-region, included Ministers and officials of government, civil society representatives, academics, and representatives from multilateral and regional organisations and bilateral donor agencies and private foundations.

Literacy in the sub-region

According to the 2008 EFA Global Monitoring Report, the adult literacy goal is the least likely of the six EFA goals to be achieved, on a global level. In this sub-region, adult literacy rates across the fourteen countries represented at the conference vary from 28% to almost 100%, among the lowest and among the highest in the world. Bangladesh, India and Pakistan together account for 25% of the global increase in adult literacy rates over the past two decades, but still have almost 50% of the 774 million illiterate adults in the world. Six countries in the sub-region are part of the UNESCO Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) which addresses particularly challenging illiteracy situations. Enrolment rates in primary education vary from 76% to almost 100%, with possible lower figures for some countries without current data. Low-quality schooling, however, can result in dropouts and lack of useable literacy skills, thus creating new 'schooled

illiterates' for whom youth and adult literacy programmes may be necessary. Gender disparities in literacy are marked in some countries and reflect the differential social status of women and men. The sub-region as a whole is characterised by cultural and linguistic diversity, calling for a high level of attention to context in designing literacy programmes.

The participants made the following recommendations for action on literacy in the sub-region:

Policies for literacy

Recommendations to governments:

- Governments should acknowledge that they have the primary responsibility for providing quality literacy learning opportunities, while supporting the significant role of civil society organizations;
- Education sector policies should systematically include the needs of adult and youth literacy, which is a neglected EFA goal in this sub-region as elsewhere, based on the right to literacy both as a basic learning tool and as a means of personal development;
- The evidence on which literacy policies are based must be derived increasingly from direct surveys of a continuum of levels of literacy performance rather than indirect assessment of literacy competence; this will include adding further questions on literacy to household surveys;
- Policies should emphasise the organic and mutually beneficial links between formal schooling for children and non-formal adult and youth learning programmes, as well as linkages between ECCE, primary and secondary education;
- Literacy policies should address gender disparities based on a clear analysis of data which are further disaggregated along other axes of disadvantage, for example, caste, ethnicity, minority status, disability, etc;
- Literacy policies should give particular attention to the needs of marginalized groups, such as ethnic or linguistic minorities, rural people and those living in slums, those with disabilities, as well as to youth;
- Adults and out-of-school youth, both dropouts and the unschooled, as well as adolescents, particularly girls, should benefit from literacy and lifeskills programmes tailored to their needs;
- In the context of achieving the benchmark of 6% of GNI in funding education in general, adult and youth literacy policies must be supported by adequate budgetary allocations, in line with the benchmark figure of 3% of national education budgets;
- Governments should consider adopting benchmarks for literacy as a basis for policy formulation and programme design, and use them as a monitoring and evaluation yardstick;

Recommendations to the international community:

- Where international frameworks do not explicitly address adult and youth literacy, international partners and donors should recognise the essential need for literacy efforts for poverty reduction and the achievement of the MDGs;
- A literacy component should be integrated into all social sector programmes, for example, health, agriculture, environment, among others;
- Gender and literacy should remain high on the agenda of the international community, given the particular needs in this matter;
- International partners, especially UNESCO, and donors should give high priority to adult and youth literacy, and support programmes, capacity development, assessment, (including through household surveys), monitoring, evaluation and research;
- International funders should allocate 3% of their aid to education to adult and youth literacy;
- As an EFA financing and support mechanism, the EFA Fast Track Initiative should urgently raise awareness that it can be used to support adult and youth literacy and should actively work to increase its funding in this area;
- As part of 'Delivering as One', UN agencies should enhance their cooperation in literacy as part of their common programming.

Learning and applying literacy

- Literacy learning should lead to socio-political empowerment and serve as an instrument of social transformation and development;
- Literacy learning should also be linked with clear development goals, such as improvement in livelihoods, and the promotion of health, lifeskills, and entrepreneurial and income-generating activities; it should also be linked with awareness of community, national and international issues;
- Literacy learning opportunities should be delivered in flexible ways (timing, place, duration, etc) which match socio-cultural diversity and occupational patterns, and which take gender relations into consideration, and should, where appropriate, enable learners to gain equivalency with and transfer into the formal system;
- Evidence shows that short-term literacy programmes do not produce sustainable literacy competence and use; literacy providers and funders must invest in long-term efforts within a framework of lifelong learning;
- Literacy materials and their content should be gender-sensitive and reflect the concerns and cultures of learners, who should contribute to their elaboration;
- The use of languages in literacy learning should reflect the way languages are used in communities, with adequate understanding of community patterns and attitudes; pilot programmes should be undertaken in multilingual approaches to literacy with initial learning in the mother tongue;
- Promoting a rich and diverse literate environment, including support to local authorship and publication, is essential to maintain literacy practices, especially for neo-literates;

- Literacy facilitators need professional training and status; voluntarism makes a valuable contribution, but is likely to be unsustainable, and appropriate remuneration must be established;
- Information and communication technologies must be harnessed appropriately to enhance the quality of literacy learning and improve the training of facilitators;
- Programmes of family literacy and intergenerational learning should be considered as ways of integrating and strengthening both adult and child literacy;
- In most cases, a certificate should validate literacy learning.

Sustaining and improving literacy efforts

- In the context of their overall responsibility for literacy efforts, governments must create space for productive partnerships, in particular with civil society organisations and community-based associations;
- Given the complex and diverse links of literacy with other sectors, governments must facilitate inter-ministerial collaboration as well as collaboration with and within civil society to ensure complementary, not duplicative action;
- The private sector in the sub-region should engage more strongly in multi-stakeholder partnerships for adult and youth literacy, emphasising the links between literacy, skills and employability;
- Community ownership of and participation in literacy efforts must be enhanced, for instance through Community Learning Centres and other initiatives;
- Transparent governance and effective and efficient management are conditions of success in educational endeavour, in schooling as in adult and youth literacy efforts, and should be reinforced by ongoing capacity development;
- Assessment, monitoring and evaluation need further development to inform planning and account for results, with an emphasis on the ownership and participation of stakeholders, and with methods and indicators adapted to the diversity of programmes and contexts; the results of this process should be made public in a timely manner;
- The quality and sustainability of literacy efforts in the sub-region will require reinforced capacity development for facilitators and other programme personnel;
- Further research, backed by adequate resources, on the nature and challenges of literacy in the sub-region, with special attention to gender issues, should be promoted, providing evidence and analysis for the design of policies and programmes, and leading to innovation;
- Viable organisations at community, provincial and national levels, which give committed support to community learning, are essential for the sustainability of literacy efforts – governments at each level should give space and encouragement to them;
- Adequate documentation and dissemination of literacy work, based on sound monitoring and evaluation, will provide the evidence for innovation, scaling up, lesson-learning and the improvement of literacy efforts.

In light of the above and as part of South-South cooperation, the Conference participants recommend strengthened networking in literacy and better management of literacy among the countries of the sub-region. This will focus on the exchange of good practices and support through technical assistance, as well as on learning the lessons of varied experiences and perspectives, including on financial management. This networking may take shape, among other possibilities, in the development of a university network on literacy, and the establishment of an institutional mechanism to facilitate South-South cooperation, such as a sub-regional literacy resource centre.